

Passages for discussion of *Sense and Sensibility*, JASNA-NC Virtual Book Group

August 21, 2022 Mary Jane Curry

Dear fellow JASNA-NC members,

If you re-read these passages and my comments, please consider them as evidence of serious pastoral, especially dislocation from a rural/pastoral home; the grief or nostalgia that dislocation engenders; nature as comforter; love of nature's beauty; and the country-city contrast (greedy, status-conscious characters generally prefer city life; people who value other people for their character, not their wealth, choose an unassuming rural life).

Elinor

1. On losing their home Norland Park:

Elinor, too, was *deeply afflicted, but still she could struggle, she could exert herself*. She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance. (pp. 6-7; italics mine)

Narrator's introduction to Elinor:

Elinor. . . possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enable her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. *She [Elinor] had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them:* it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters [Marianne] had resolved never to be taught. (p. 6; italics mine)

2. Losing Edward: “constant and painful exertion”

In London, Lucy tells Elinor about the secret engagement after Elinor expresses surprise at her interest in Mrs. Ferrars [excerpt—it's a long conversation]

[referring to her own questions about Mrs. Ferrars] “I dare say you are, and I am sure I do not at all wonder at it. But if I dared tell you all, you would not be so much surprised. Mrs. Ferrars is certainly nothing to me at present,—but the time may come,—how soon it will come must depend on herself—when we may be very intimately connected.”

She looked down as she said this, amiably bashful, with only one side glance at her companion to observe its effect on her.

“Good heavens!” cried Elinor. “what do you mean? Are you acquainted with Mr. Robert Ferrars? Can you be—” And she did not feel much delighted with the idea of such a sister-in-law.

“No:” replied Lucy, “not to Mr. Robert Ferrars—I never saw him in my life; but” fixing her eyes upon Elinor, “to his elder brother.”

What felt Elinor at this moment? Astonishment, that would have been as painful as it was strong, had not an immediate disbelief of the assertion attended it. She

turned toward Lucy in silent amazement, unable to divine the reason or object of such a declaration, and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt in no danger of an hysterical fit, or swoon.

“You may well be surprised,” continued Lucy; “for to be sure you could have had no idea of it before...and I should never have mentioned it to you, if I had not felt the greatest dependance in the world upon your secrecy....And I do not think Mr. Ferrars can be displeased, when he knows I have trusted you, because I know he has the highest opinion in the world of all your family, and looks upon yourself and the other Miss Dashwoods, quite as his own sisters.” She paused.

Elinor for a few moments remained silent. Her astonishment at what she heard was at first too great for words.... [After, she asks how long the engagement has gone on, Lucy answers in detail.] (128-130)

3. In London, Elinor can finally tell Marianne why Edward insists, against his family’s wishes, that he will marry Lucy because their engagement has become public knowledge:

3.“You do not suppose that I have ever felt much.—For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature; knowing that it would make you and my mother most unhappy whenever it were explained to you, yet unable to prepare you for it in the least.—It was told me,—*it was in a manner forced on me by the very person herself, whose prior engagement ruined all my prospects; and told me, as I thought, with triumph.*—This person’s suspicions, therefore, I have had to oppose, by endeavouring to appear indifferent where I have been most deeply interested;—and *it has been not only once;—I have had her hopes and exultation to listen to again and again.—I have known myself to be divided from Edward forever without hearing one circumstance that could make me less desire the connection.*—Nothing has proved him unworthy; nor has any thing declared him indifferent to me.—I have had to contend against the unkindness of his sister, and the insolence of his mother; and have *suffered* the punishment of an attachment, without enjoying its advantages.—And all this has been going on at a time, when, as you too well know it has not been my only unhappiness.—If you can think me capable of ever feeling—*surely you may suppose that I have suffered now.* (pp. 263-264; italics mine)

Elinor continues to explain that her apparent calmness was the “effect of constant and painful exertion. . . . I was *very* unhappy.” Only now does Marianne begin to recognize her own selfishness (p. 264).

In London, Elinor gets an opportunity to seek quiet and comfort in nature when Mrs. Jennings asks her to see Kensington Gardens (p. 271). As Andrew Ettin explains, nature confers “at least a reminder that such troubles as there are can be measured against the larger scale of nature” (129). Readers are reminded of the extent of Elinor’s confinement indoors when the narrator explains that this outing happens only because Mrs. Jennings has invited her; a lady could not walk alone in such a public space. At first Elinor, wishing for solitude, is fortunate: a friend of Mrs. Jennings joins them, and the two older women are so engrossed in each other that Elinor can be several steps from them. [My book chapter on *S and S* likens Lucy to the “serpent in the garden”

motif in the seventeenth century Italian pastoral paintings that inspired travel in search of “picturesque” scenery.]

Marianne

4. “Dear, dear Norland!” said Marianne, as she wandered alone before the house, on the last evening of their being there, “when shall I cease to regret you!—when learn to feel a home elsewhere!—Oh! Happy house, could you know what I suffer now in viewing you from this spot, from when perhaps I may view you no more!—And you, ye well-known trees!—but you will continue the same.—No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer!—No; you will continue the same; *unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion, and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade!* (p. 27)

Elinor saw, with concern, *the excess of her sister’s sensibility*. . . . The agony of grief which overpowered [Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne] at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow. . . . (pp. 6-7; italics mine)

5. After she is cruelly snubbed by Willoughby at the large private party in London (pp. 177-178):

The evening passed off in the equal *indulgence of feeling*. She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftenest joined, and sat at the instrument gazing on every line of music that he had written out for her, *till her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied*. . . . *In books, too, as well as in music, she courted the misery* which a contrast between the past and present was certain of giving. She read nothing but what they used to read together. (p. 163; italics mine)

6. **Marianne at Cleveland**, the Palmer estate, on the way home from London with Mrs. Jennings:

Two *delightful twilight walks* on the third and fourth evenings of her being there, not merely on the dry gravel of the shrubbery, but all over the grounds, and especially in the most distant parts of them, where there was *something more of wildness* than in the rest, where the trees were the oldest, *and the grass was the longest and wettest*, had—assisted by the still greater imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings—given Marianne a cold so violent, as, though for a day or two trifled with or denied, would force itself by increasing ailments, on the concern of every body, and the notice of herself. (305-06; italics mine)ⁱ

7. Marianne at home for two days, mostly recovered, after Elinor can reveal much of what Col. Brandon and Willoughby himself have told her:

“As for regret,” said Marianne, “I have done with that, as far as he is concerned.” [she says she’ll talk of how she feels now.] If I could be satisfied on one point, if I could be allowed to think that he was not always acting a part, not always

deceiving me;—but above all, if I could be assured that he never was so very wicked as my fears have sometimes fancied him, since the story of that unfortunate girl”—

She stopped. Elinor joyfully treasured her words as she answered, “you could be assured of that, you think you should be easy.”

“Yes. My peace of mind is doubly involved in it;—for not only is it horrible to suspect a person, who has been what he has been to me, of such designs,—but what must it make me appear to myself?—What in a situation like mine, but a most shamefully unguarded affection could expose me to:—

[Asked how she would “account for his behaviour,” she replies “Oh! How gladly would I suppose him, only fickle, very, very fickle” (pp. 344-245). In along passage explaining herself she includes this admission that she had been suicidal:] “I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my own want of fortitude under them almost led me to the grave. My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction.” (p. 345)

Willoughby:

8. Willoughby on one of his first visits to Barton Cottage:

“To me it is faultless. Nay, more, I consider it as the only form of building in which happiness is attainable, and were I rich enough, I would instantly pull Combe down, and build it up again in the exact plan of this cottage.”

“With dark narrow stairs, and a kitchen that smokes, I suppose,” said Elinor.

“Yes,” cried he in the same eager tone, “with all and every thing belonging to it;—in no one convenience or *inconvenience* about it, should the least variation be perceptible. Then, and then only under such a roof, I might perhaps be as happy at Combe as I have been at Barton.” (pp. 73)

After he tells them all that the cottage “will always have one claim on my affection, which no other can possibly share,” Marianne’s “fine eyes were fixed so expressively on Willoughby, as plainly denoted how well she understood him” (p. 73). Such language strongly implies his intention to marry Marianne.

9. At Cleveland, Willoughby’s drunken excuses of himself to Elinor reveal what Joan Klingel Ray concludes is clinical sociopathy [On pp. 209-211, Col Brandon has had to tell her about Willoughby’s ruin of the younger Eliza]

[of the large party in London] “what an evening of agony it was!—Marianne, beautiful as an angel on one side, calling me Willoughby in such a tone!....and Sophia, jealous as the devil on the other hand, looking all that was—Well, it does not signify...I ran away from you all as soon as I could; but not before I had seen Marianne’s sweet face as white as death.”IT was a horrid sight!—*Yet when I thought of her today as really dying, it was a kind of comfort to me to imagine that I knew exactly how she would appear to those, who saw her last in this world.*

[He asks and Elinor says Marianne is going to recover. Elinor asks about his cruel

letter and he goes on for a while describing Sophia's writing and making him copy it; more disparagement of Sophia]

"Do not talk to me of my wife," he said with an heavy sigh. She does not deserve my compassion.—She knew I had no regard for her when we married.—Well, married we were...*And now do you pity me, Miss Dashwood?—or have I said all this to no purpose? —am I—be it only one degree—am I less guilty in your opinion than I was before?—My intentions were not always wrong. Have I explained away any part of my guilt?"*

"Yes, you have certainly removed something , a little.—You have proved yourself, on the whole, less faulty than I had believed you. You have proved your heart less wicked, much less wicked. But I hardly know—the misery that you have inflicted—I hardly know what could have made it worse."(328-330; it continues to 322; italics mine)

Question: Does it concern you that even Elinor can think—or say—that after his explanation Willoughby is "less wicked, much less wicked"?

10. Col. Brandon:

The long passages in which Col. Brandon narrates the tragedies of the first Eliza, with whom he was in love; and her daughter, also Eliza, are too long for us to read now; they're on pp. 209-211.

What do you think about his feelings for Marianne by the time they marry?

[just after they marry] Colonel Brandon was now as happy, as all those who best loved him, believed he deserved to be;—in Marianne he was consoled for every past affliction;—her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness; and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend. Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby. (p. 379)

What do you think? Some scholars find problems with the Brandon-Marianne age difference, seeing Marianne as sacrificed to an older man; Brandon is thirty-five or thirty-six and she is seventeen (p. 378). Not relevant, Joan Klingel Ray notes: Brandon is an authentic hero. Although the narrator describes Marianne's marriage as the "reward of all," this phrase refers to the feelings of her mother, Elinor, and Edward (p. 378).

Also, I believe Austen's contemporaries would have known first-hand that between Britain's imperial territories and its wars with France (1798-1815) there were far fewer able-bodied young men closer to Marianne's age than there were pretty women eligible to marry them.

Edward

11. He and Elinor agree on matters of taste and style of living.

Both want a quiet rural life free of “grandeur” (p. 91).

Elinor sympathizes with his wish to become a clergyman rather than “distinguish” himself in public life, as his mother and sister wish (pp. 90-92, 102).

In Edward and Elinor’s conversations at Barton Cottage, they prefer the productive agricultural England that “unites beauty with utility” to the picturesque blight that enraptured Willoughby (pp. 97-98, 101). After a walk into Barton village, Edward expresses his “admiration of the surrounding country...[after he] had seen many parts of the valley...and the village itself...had exceedingly pleased him” (p. 96).

Edward praises the same beauties of Devonshire as Elinor loves:

[narrator but probable Elinor’s opinion] The situation of the house was good. High hills rose immediately behind, and at no great distance on each side; some of which were open downs, the others cultivated and woody. The village of Barton was chiefly on one of these hills, and formed a pleasant view from the cottage windows. The prospect in front was more extensive; it commanded the whole of the valley, and reached into the country beyond. The hills which surrounded the cottage terminated the valley in that direction; under another name, and in another course, it branched out again between two of the steepest of them. (pp. 28-29)

Surrounding hills protect the cottage from strong winds. The hillsides grow crops or trees.ⁱⁱ Barton village “provided a pleasant view”; it is in no danger of being razed to satisfy a fad for picturesque wildness. Mary Lascelles observes that Austen’s descriptions of rural England are comments on the character perceiving it, and that each rural setting evokes its “moral climate.”ⁱⁱⁱ

12. Yet Edward has lied:

“I never saw you wear a ring before, Edward,” she [Marianne] cried. “Is that Fanny’s hair?...But I should have thought her hair had been darker.”

...when she saw how much she had pained Edward, her own vexation at her want of thought could not be surpassed by his. He coloured very deeply, and giving a momentary glance Edward, replied, “Yes, it is my sister’s hair. The setting always casts a different shade on it you know.”

Elinor had met his eye, and looked consciously likewise. That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne...[but Elinor] internally resolved henceforward to catch every opportunity of eyeing the hair and of satisfying herself, beyond all doubt, that it was exactly the shade of her own.

Edward’s embarrassment lasted some time, and it ended with an absence of mind still more settled. He was particularly grave the whole morning. [Marianne blames herself.] (pp. 98-99)

13. What do you make of Joan Klingel Ray’s assessment of Edward? [Or did Austen not know these details of law?]

In fact, Edward would not have been legally responsible for his engagement to Lucy: he was nineteen—legally underage—when he entered the engagement. By the Marriage Act of 1753, any contract made by a person under twenty-one, without parental consent, was void (Stone 92). And even if the court had considered Edward, by prolonging the engagement to age 23-24, financially independent with his £2,000, his brother, Robert, suggests outright that his family would have helped him to disengage himself: “‘I cannot help thinking in short,’ Robert tells Elinor, ‘that means might have been found’” (300).

According to legal practices of the day, “means” could surely “have been found.” Assuming that Edward’s continuing the engagement into his majority would have made him liable for breach of promise, he would not have suffered greatly if Lucy had sought damages.

14. Austen’s potentially problematic happy ending regarding Edward and Elinor

After the Dashwood women’s move to Devonshire, Edward visits them: (89). Soon Mrs. Dashwood’s motherly affection breaks down his reserve, but he continues to alternate warmth with reserve towards Elinor; as she notes to herself, “It was evident that he was unhappy” (96).

ⁱ Landscape historian Robert L. Clark explains, “Evidently the wildness and oldness of various parts of this shrubbery imply that it was once a formal wilderness which has now been allowed to grow ‘shrubby.’ It might be suggested that at this stage Austen has not developed a particular understanding of the history of shrubbery and is merely using it as a social space convenient to her narrative. Later, in *Mansfield Park*, she is much more deliberate.” I disagree: I believe Austen is associating Marianne with “wilderness” and a cognate, the verb “wilder,” meaning to wander or lose one’s way. See Robert L. Clark, “Wilderness and Shrubby in Austen’s Works, *Persuasions on-line* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter 2015).

ⁱⁱIn the next two novels, Elizabeth loves Pemberley for its natural beauty united with practicality, and Emma praises Mr. Knightley’s Donwell estate for its similarly sheltered “situation” and productive farmland (p. 357).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London: Athlone Press, 1939), p. 178.